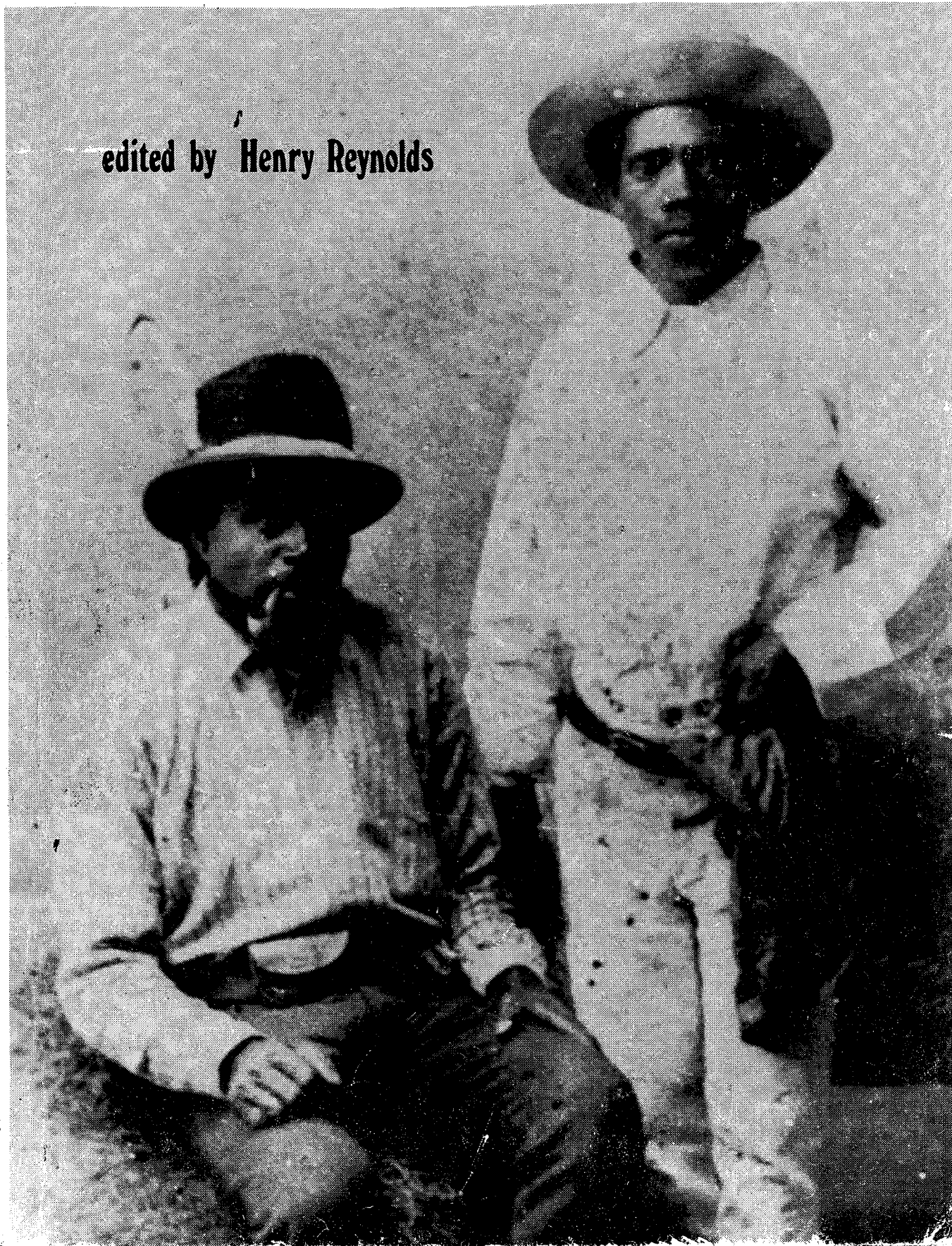


RACE RELATIONS IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

edited by Henry Reynolds



'A SNIDER IS A SPLENDID CIVILISER': EUROPEAN ATTITUDES TO
ABORIGINES ON THE PALMER RIVER GOLDFIELD, 1873-1883.

Ms. N.S. Kirkman

In 1872 a Government sponsored expedition led by William Hann named the Palmer River, located west of Cooktown and north of Georgetown,¹ after the Chief Secretary and Premier. The expedition found gold; however, in Hann's estimation the discovery was 'without flattering results' although worthy of further prospecting.² James Venture Mulligan, an experienced miner in North Queensland, accepted the challenge and promptly started for the new area as soon as copies of Hann's report and map were available. Mulligan's party reached the Palmer by 29 June 1873, and after twelve days found payable gold. He arrived at Georgetown on 3 September 1873 and nine days later returned with the first diggers for the new rush.³ By the end of August 1874 there were 5000 Europeans and 2000 Chinese on the field.⁴

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During the decade from 1873, little was done by Europeans to establish harmonious relations with the Aborigines of the Palmer area. It was well known via the pages of the Queenslander that the Aborigines had tried to burn out Mulligan and his party while they were prospecting for payable gold.⁵ However, violent conflict between the Aboriginal inhabitants and the European intruders did not eventuate on that occasion. Indeed, the Aborigines were naturally curious as to the strange pursuits of the prospectors. According to the Etheridge correspondent to the Cleveland Bay Express:

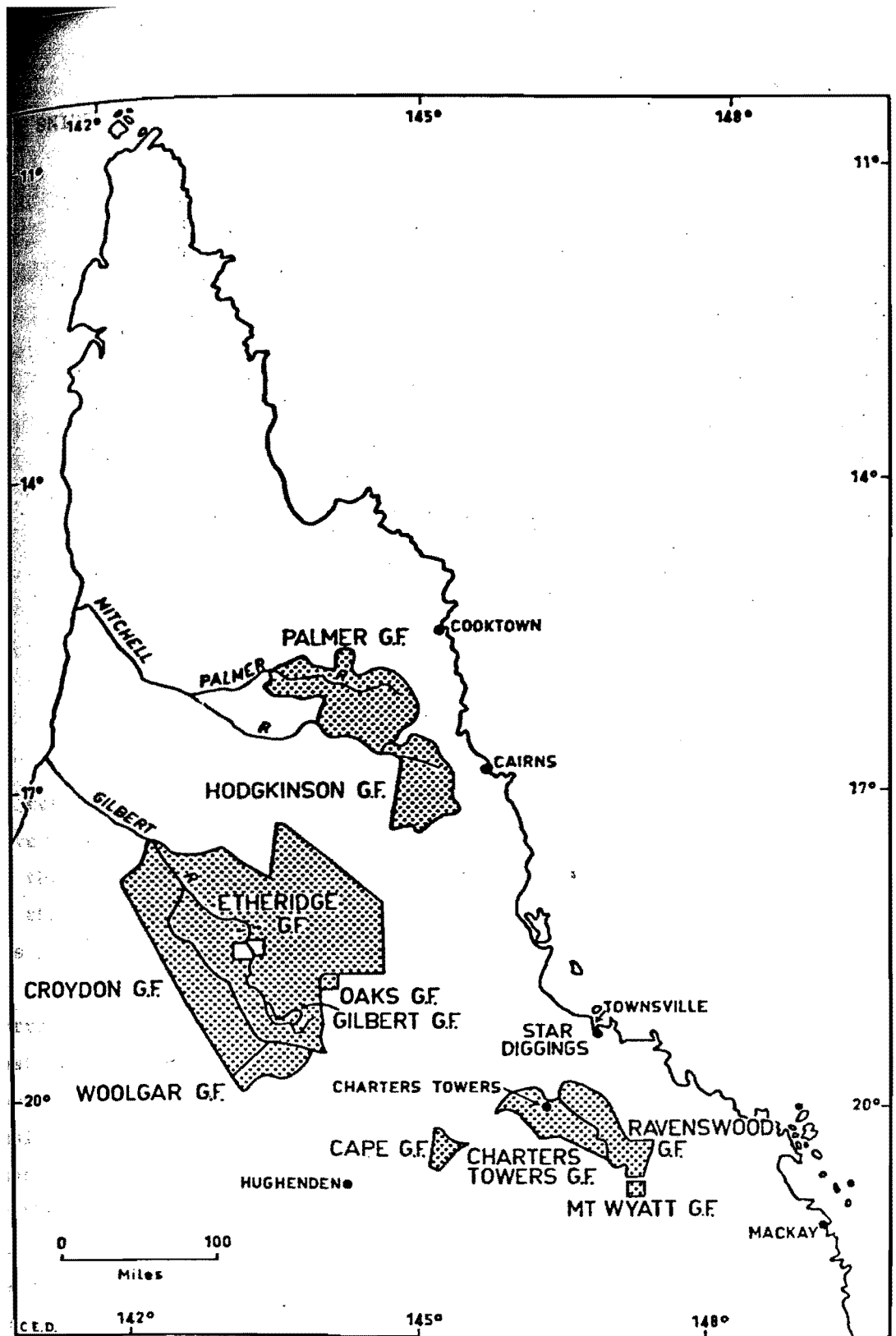
The aborigines were evidently all abroad as to what the white men were rooting up the sand and soil for. Their first belief was that the object was something to eat, and, as the prospectors proceeded further up the river, down they would come, and commence rooting also in the abandoned holes. This they did perserveringly, as the prospectors could see on their way down the river again.⁶

That there was no initial overt hostility on the part of the Aborigines of the Palmer River was often stressed later in the debate adjudicated by the Queenslander during 1880.⁷ By November of 1873, the situation on the newly established Palmer River mining frontier had darkened, for along with the extension of alluvial mining in the river itself, armed miners had made at least one attack on an Aboriginal camp without apparent provocation, taking Aboriginal tools and dillybags. Only after the raid was it discovered that European tools were included among the Aboriginal possessions. On another occasion, Aborigines discovered and dug up a buried store left by diggers which contained cartridges, canvas and clothes. However, the affair was not looked upon lightly by the Europeans, and the Palmer correspondent to the Queenslander prescribed violent reaction to such inquisitiveness:

The darkies are very bold, and must be
better taught the effects of the rifle
before we get safety on the Palmer.⁸

The stage was set. Materialism and the means to increased material prosperity had to be upheld with the use of firearms. By the 1870's, their use was rarely questioned when acquiring land on the pastoral and mining frontiers.

Even more violent contact was associated with the party which travelled from the Endeavour River in late October 1873, accompanied by various Government officials and members of the Native Mounted Police. At the mouth of the Endeavour itself, the Royal Navy's survey flags attracted the attention of the Aborigines and were repeatedly taken down, much to the chagrin of the officer who was making the survey.⁹ This was interpreted by Gold Commissioner Howard St. George as 'intense hostility entertained by the blacks towards the location of European settlement', and a declaration of hostilities on the part of the Aborigines.¹⁰ A description of the event appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald of 7 January 1874 originally written for the Cleveland Bay Express by a member of the Queensland Government Expedition to the Palmer. According to this un-named member of the Expedition:



PRINCIPAL NORTH QUEENSLAND GOLDFIELDS

Reproduced, by permission of the author and publishers, G.C. Bolton, A Thousand Miles Away, A.N.U. Press, Canberra 1970.

A black was seen just in the act of seizing the flag, having waded and swum some 500 yards to get there; this, too, at mid-day. Whiz, whiz, went the bullets shot by the Native Police; bang, crack, bang, went the rifles of the ship. At the sound of each shot the intrepid savage dived under the water, the flag-staff in one hand, the spear in the other. The bullets splashed all round him but he still held to his prize. At length the shore was reached, and, with a triumphant wave of the spear and flag, he vanished into space, alias the scrub. It was a defiant declaration of war to the white fellow, and as a simple act of daring, beat anything I ever saw. The Native Troopers, under the command of Sub-Inspector Johnstone, were wild to go over, for the purpose of teaching the 'myalls' better behaviour. Two gentlemen went over after sunset, and followed the fresh tracks for upwards of a mile, but failed to reach the camp.¹¹

In reply to this, Joseph Cooper on January 15th 1874 urged the British Government to initiate an enquiry into the treatment of Aborigines in the "Colony of Brisbane" to find out the truth of the allegation in this report and to bring the guilty parties to justice.¹² Cooper was prompted by two letters that appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald in January and February 1874. To Charles G. Heydon,¹³ the first of the correspondents, the flag incident was an example of 'the utter want' that existed on the part of the Government Expedition and the Native Mounted Police under Sub-Inspector Johnstone of 'the slightest hesitation or sense of wrong in putting a native to death'. He added that this attitude was 'nothing strange' in the conduct of Europeans in the Colony of Queensland, however, he hoped that the new ministry and the people of the Colony would advocate needed reform. The Queensland Colonial Government, he charged, has 'deliberately adopted the system of arming the savage for the extermination of the savage, and has sometimes ignored, sometimes approved of the numberless consequent atrocities'. While efforts were being made to stem labour traffic in the South Seas 'a system of slavery far more atrocious and degrading, and a system of native slaughter far more merciless and complete, are on daily and hourly operation in the British Colony'.¹⁴

Heydon obviously saw the incident at the Endeavour River as heralding another violent frontier and the actions of the Government Expedition as determining the nature of culture contact in the Cooktown-Palmer area. Heydon emotionally exclaimed to the reading public:

This party, on board the Leichhardt had gone to establish a settlement at the Endeavour River. It was then, therefore, that permanent relations between the two races were to begin. Might we not expect that at such a time the intending civilized Christian and immeasurably stronger race, would show some small desire to do good to the other - would, at least, wish to be friends with it? Is it at this time of day, in the nineteenth century of progress and humanity, that Englishmen, upon their settlement amongst an inferior race, are to despise the slightest attempt to conciliate or improve it, but to begin at once to war upon it, and (for that is what such a war means), to exterminate it, for such paltry offences as that mentioned above? And this was a Government Expedition too! Can it be possible that its leaders had received no instructions as to their treatment of the natives, and the importance of establishing friendly relations and treating them with kindness? Every one in the expedition must have known that if the settlement began by entering into hostilities with the natives, it would be almost impossible afterwards to restore peace; while if, on the other hand, a friendly intercourse were once established, there would be some chance that it might continue.¹⁵

Another correspondent to the Sydney Morning Herald supported Heydon's accusations with examples from the Bowen-Kennedy area.¹⁶

Interchanges between the Colony of Queensland and the British Government continued for over a year after the incident but nothing was done to forestall the predicted violence in the Cooktown-Palmer area. Gold Commissioner St. George immediately requested more Native Police to be led by 'locally' experienced officers,¹⁷ and was sent two troopers from G.E. Dalrymple's command.¹⁸ Without regard to the

continuing correspondence between the colony and Britain, the Queensland legislature voted in supply for the 'continued support of these irregular troopers'.¹⁹ The Commissioner of Police, D.T. Seymour, self-righteously announced that the original report in the Cleveland Bay Express was exaggerated since none of the officials on the Government Expedition reported the incident to him; he was also of the opinion that the lapse of time had rendered 'any investigation into the truth of the matter an absolute impossibility'.²⁰ The Earl of Carnarvon, Secretary of State for Colonies, admitted to the Governor of the Colony of Queensland, that he was 'slow to believe that the facts are as they have been represented', however, he did recognize the 'necessity of taking stringent measures for checking any abuses on the part of the Native Police - a force which, from its constitution, requires the constant and close supervision of the Government'.²¹ Shirking his responsibility, the Governor of Queensland declared in reply that distance made the reception of accurate information difficult and admonished those who did not complain directly to the Commissioner of Police.²² However, Commissioner of Police Seymour preferred to turn a blind eye to matters pertaining to the Native Police. He informed the British Government on this occasion that:

no instances of the wholesale slaughter of the blacks alluded to have ever come under my notice privately or officially, during a residence of nearly fourteen years in the colony.²³

Yet, during the same debate J.W. Chesson, the Secretary of the Aboriginal Protection Society, reported that:

it has been repeatedly alleged by respectable and apparently trustworthy persons, that this force, under the pretence of preserving order, is really engaged in exterminating the aborigines: and that the massacres which take place are accompanied by excesses of a yet more revolting character.²⁴

Seymour's statement is indeed questionable in that he was well aware of the various Select Committees that had already inquired into the conduct of the Native Police. His indifference left the onus on the Governor of the Colony to justify the use of the

Native Police in frontier districts. The Governor, in his reply to the Secretary of State for Colonies in August 1875, described the Aborigines of the North as 'numerous, savage, treacherous, and very commonly cannibals' - a conclusion that was readily supported by the violent culture contact apparent by that time on the Palmer mining frontier.²⁶

The first expedition from the Endeavour River expected contact with the Aborigines to be violent, and, according to North Queensland folklore, it was. Although Howard St. George made only a terse reference to the 'blacks numerous and hostile on way up',²⁷ in his first report to the Colonial Secretary after his arrival on the Palmer, it is suggested by later sources that a more serious affray occurred near the Normanby River at a place called Battle Camp. In late January 1874, the Brisbane Telegraph printed a letter which clearly and nonchalantly admitted to an encounter between the first expedition and the Aborigines near the Normanby River, in which members of the expedition 'shot a lot'.²⁸ North Queensland folklore has placed this incident at the forefront of European endeavour in the North and it was embellished every now and again by popular writings in newspapers; at the same time it emphasized the superiority of the Northern Aborigines over Southern Aborigines in their daring and tactics. The incident, it is believed, took the character of a European battle in which Aborigines fought in ranks, while another group attempted to steal the horses.²⁹ However, in the light of evidence of the 1870's and 1880's the incident needs further investigation.

Before 1922 references to Battle Camp were vague, in keeping with consistent attempts to refute suggestions of misconduct on the part of the officials or diggers of the first expedition. First of all, Howard St. George did not mention any event of such magnitude in his correspondence except to describe the Aborigines as 'numerous and fierce', and to recommend the establishment of Native Mounted Police camps on the Palmer and Normanby Rivers.³⁰ In addition, the letter to the Brisbane Telegraph was preceded by at least two letters sent to the Cleveland Bay Express and the Northern Argus, written by members

of the first expedition from the Endeavour, which did not mention the more brutal details found in later accounts.³¹ At the enquiry held into the allegations of the Brisbane Telegraph letter, a statement was produced by members of the first expedition declaring that 'in no single instance did we see any of the officers of the Expedition, or any one accompanying the Expedition fire a single shot at the blacks except at Sunrise Camp' where one Aborigine was shot.³² One of the miners whose name appeared at the end of this statement was William J. Webb,³³ who was later responsible for the folkloric resurrection of Battle Camp in the second volume of Robert Logan Jack's Northmost Australia published in 1922.³⁴ Although the Cooktown papers were not in operation at the time of the event, there remains a conspicuous absence of references to the event - even as a source of propaganda. The Palmer correspondent to the Cooktown Herald August 1874 referred to thirteen Aborigines being dispersed, but was careful to qualify his information as a 'legend'.³⁵ It was not until the end of 1875, just over two years after the event, that a local newspaper attempted to give more details of Battle Camp; even then the Cooktown Courier was quoting from an article in the Rockhampton Bulletin of 20 November 1875. According to the latter:

[At Battle Camp]...the natives wholly ignorant of the terrible power of firearms, and confiding in their numbers, showed a ferocity and daring wholly unexpected and surpassed. Grasping at the very muzzles of the rifles they attempted to wrest them from the hands of the whites, standing to be shot down than yield an inch. This was the beginning of a series of attacks that at first were daringly open; but as the knowledge dawned on their minds that the white race had a fatal superiority of weapons, these attacks became stealthy, cautious and only made of great numbers and situation.³⁶

Even when one assumes the event did indeed occur, then the problem of ascertaining the number killed would have to remain unsolved.

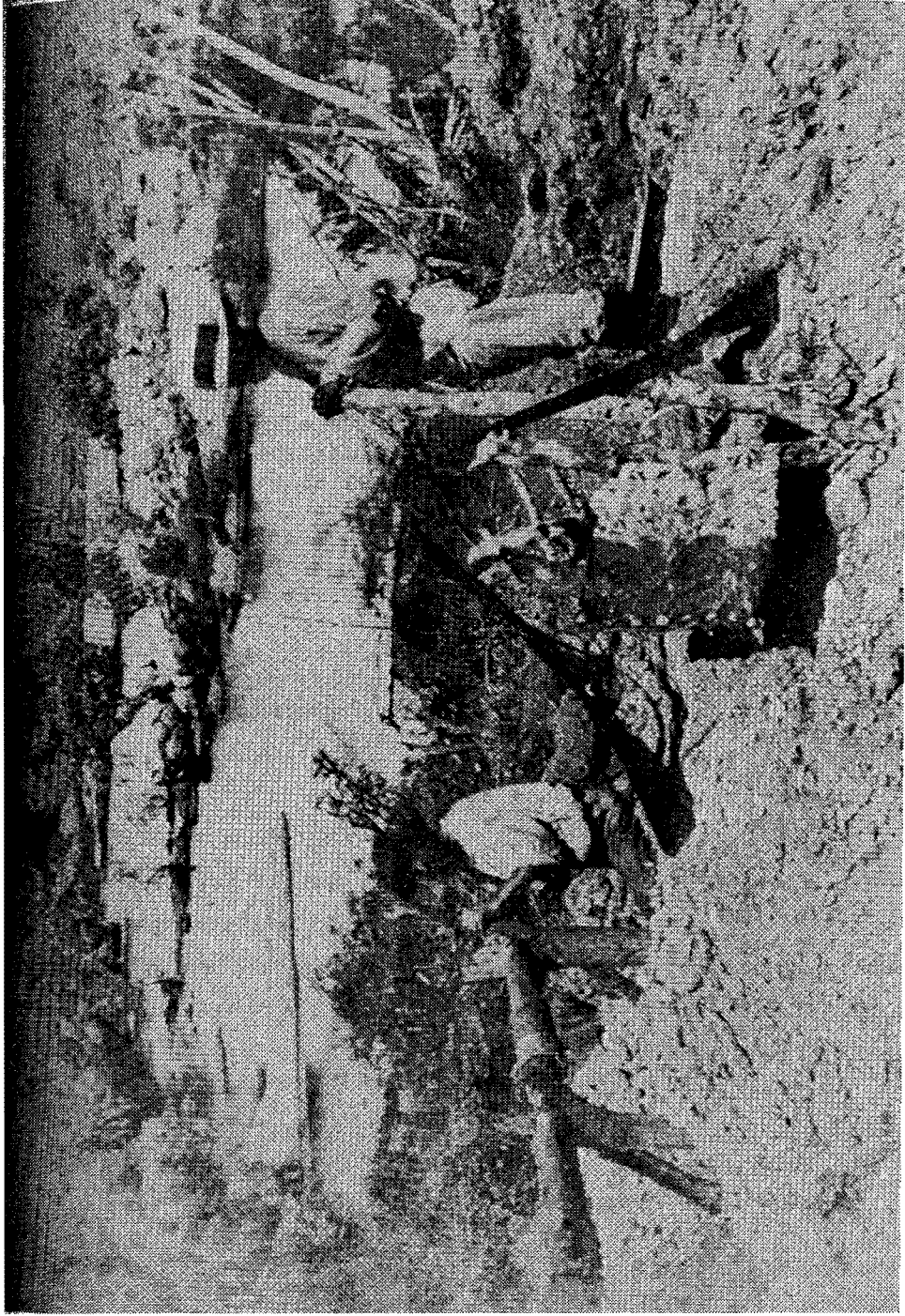
In 1922, at the request of Robert Logan Jack, William Webb wrote an account of the event which in 1874 he testified did not occur. According to Webb:

About five next morning, 5th November, while the stars were still shining, a crowd of natives camp up yelling out a terrible war cry, and they reached to about 70 yards from where we lay all over the ground. There were about 40 in the first and as many more in reserve some distance behind. Just as the day was breaking, Messrs. Macmillan and St. George advanced towards them. I noticed that they fired over the heads of the blacks, but some of the men fired straight at the blacks, some of whom fell. Thereupon the blacks ran away and were pursued as far as a large lagoon, and all that went there stayed there.³⁷

Webb's second account placed the number killed at eighty and not just one as he had previously testified nearly fifty years earlier. The validity of his account, however, must be looked at in the light of his signature on the earlier account. Even the number gleaned from a rumour by the Palmer correspondent of the Cooktown Courier in 1875 cannot be corroborated. Nevertheless, Battle Camp, whether fiction or fact, was influential in forming attitudes not only of the miners, but of writers of the twentieth century. If it did not happen, it was what those involved expected might happen.

* * *

An overview of the whole decade reflects little change in European attitudes to the Aborigines of the Palmer-Cooktown area. The nature of the mining industry and the character of the mining population tended to weaken attempts to ameliorate the situation. Seasonal variation and its effects on the intensity of mining activity obviously influenced the degree of violence between the Aborigines and the miners. Admittedly the number of men and animals speared over the years decreased, however, the total population was also decreasing as alluvial gold became more difficult to procure. In November 1873, at the height of the initial rush, Gold Commissioner St. George referred to the Aborigines as 'about the worst and most determined I have come across'.³⁸ Yet the situation had not changed appreciably a decade later when the Maytown correspondent to the Queenslander maintained that



North Queensland Miners with guns at the ready

The civilization of the darkies in North Queensland, especially about this district, does not advance, apparently. They seem to have a predilection for Chinamen. During the last two years attacks have been made on Chinese located in or about Fine Gold Creek. These attacks are simple acts of reprisal, as well as retribution. In days gone by, and in many instances at the present time, if a blackfellow is seen he is brutally shot down the same as a dingo, and with about the same feeling of remorse. No wonder we hear of outrages committed by the blacks. The game apparently in the North is who gets first sight; a solitary swagsman or Chinaman frequently gets speared, out of vengeance for someone else's misdeeds. The value of a blackfellow's life is viewed as nothing more or less than a wild beast's. They are hunted as wolves and shot down whenever seen. It must be admitted it is very annoying to have one's cattle speared and valuable horses maimed for life by blacks. Is it justifiable, though, because these ignorant creatures do this, that they should be killed, poisoned, or otherwise deprived of life?³⁹

Brief periods of peace and optimism alternated with outbreaks of reprisal and counter-reprisal throughout the decade. In the first few years optimism prevailed over the dangers. Mulligan in April 1875 finished writing a guide for George Slater and Company for the purpose of advising the 'new chum' digger. Despite the fact that 1874 had been a bad year for fatal spearings, and the Police Commissioner had received incessant applications from the Cook and Palmer area for protection against the Aborigines, Mulligan sought to play down the extent of violence:

The blacks are now only troublesome on the roads and outskirts of the goldfields, and arrangements have been made by the authorities for better police protection.⁴⁰

As the Aborigines seemed to be attracted to the main access routes and police patrols had to cover a large area, such advice was hardly responsible. The police were always on the move, and because of the unsettled nature of the diggings the Police Commissioner thought it

'injudicious to erect permanent buildings at any particular spot'.⁴¹ This condition, influenced partly by the nature of mining, further retarded any concern for the future of the Aborigines. By the end of 1875, two years after the rush, still no attempt had been made to conciliate the Aborigines, and contact between the races remained hostile. According to the Commissioner of Police:

In every other part of the colony the advancing settlers have been able to enter into some arrangements, more or less friendly, with the native inhabitants; but since the Cook and Palmer Districts have been opened up, no instance is known of any communication having been induced to enter the camp of the white man. Notwithstanding this fact, well known to every man in the districts mentioned, no precautions whatsoever are taken by travellers for their own protection.⁴²

In 1876, Warden Sellheim recognized a decline in the spearings by Aborigines,⁴³ and although the main Cooktown Road was still the chief trouble spot, 'the outrages have been quite insignificant when compared with former years'.⁴⁴ However, this was a temporary peace for in 1877, the Cooktown Courier declared that the Aborigines were 'neither frightened nor subdued' and prophesied that 'it will be a long time before they are quiet'.⁴⁵ The editor of the Courier maintained that the Aborigines had not been 'cowed', and their numbers had not decreased appreciably, as if peace and the decline of the Aboriginal population were synonymous.⁴⁶ Government and local views on the degree of violence on the Palmer differed. Although the Commissioner of Police considered that the depredations committed by the Aborigines had greatly decreased during 1877,⁴⁷ the Cooktown Courier was less optimistic. To the Courier the Aborigines were far 'more dangerous and audacious now, than they were the first year after the opening of the Palmer'.⁴⁸

The year 1879 was the first year after the opening of the Palmer that had no reported deaths by spearing. This may be attributed to a marked drop in population due to rushes elsewhere, particularly to the Coen. In 1880, the Queenslander began its campaign against the inefficiency of the N.M.P. and the wilful murder of Aborigines in

North Queensland. The editor stated that the situation had not changed:

In the Cape York Peninsula the race conflict has hardly diminished in intensity since the whites began it by robbing and shooting the blacks.... No doubt their numbers have been greatly thinned, but have not been cowed.⁴⁹

As N.A. Loos points out, although by 1880 the major rushes were over, the Aborigines had not been 'let in' on the frontier mining fields.⁵⁰

This was so on the Palmer, although Edward Palmer of Gamboola Station did attempt to 'let in' the Kokominni during 1880⁵¹ with the help of Sub-Inspector Jocelyn Brooke. Brooke managed to bring some Cape Bedford Aborigines into Cooktown the following year.⁵² Nevertheless, despite his relative success, he considered that the Aborigines of the western part of the Palmer Goldfield 'would drive a spear through him'.⁵³

It can be concluded that throughout the ebb and flow of culture contact on the Palmer and in the Cooktown area, violence and counter-violence remained the underlying theme. No attempt was made by the mining population to conciliate the Aborigines. The ameliorative work done by Edward Palmer and Sub-Inspectors O'Connor and Brooke was considered premature because it was believed that the Aborigines were not yet ready. The frontier remained violent throughout the first decade after the discovery of gold on the Palmer, and reports of narrow escapes were still being made in the 1890's.⁵⁴

* * *

The geography of the area obviously played an important part in determining the nature of conflict and also its intensity. Lewis says violence erupted in reaction to a hostile environment;⁵⁵ Evans claims that those who interfered with social growth in this difficult environment were regarded by the Colonial Government as nuisances.⁵⁶ Thus frontier violence arose as a means of eliminating the Aboriginal problem. Yet ironically the Aboriginal familiarity with a harsh physical environment encouraged greater resistance. The Queenslander

recognized this fact:

Nature herself intervenes in favor of the
aboriginal more effectively than in
southern colonies.⁵⁷

As early as 1875, D.T. Seymour virtually admitted defeat with regard to successfully supplying the miner with adequate protection because '...from the broken nature of the country and almost total absence of grass, it was very difficult to keep any Police there at all'.⁵⁸ Cliffs, limestone walls and the Conglomerate Range itself made police protection difficult.⁵⁹ The dry season restricted police patrols because of the lack of feed for their horses;⁶⁰ the wet season turned much of the area to bog, preventing patrols, and making the Aborigines more active and daring.⁶¹ The distance from Cooktown to the south made miners psychologically insecure. However, it was a combination of geography and the nature of mining itself that determined the more violent character of culture contact, and, according to Loos, was responsible for producing 'a pattern of conflict significantly different from that on the pastoral frontier'.⁶² 'Gully raking' meant that miners were scattered in small groups, leaving themselves in a vulnerable position. Water was important to the extraction of alluvial gold, and as miners were constantly moving in search of a 'new patch', they also occupied the main watercourses, bringing them into competition with the Aborigines. According to Loos:

The intensity of the conflict was dependent upon the location and terrain of the mining field and the nature of the invader's industry. The fields were situated on or near watercourses that were essential to both the invading and indigenous populations. As well, they were generally situated in mountainous terrain which made exploitation difficult and expensive and facilitated Aboriginal resistance. The fluid nature of the mining population meant that there were no sure refuges to which the Aborigines could retire. The unpredictable intrusion of miners must have been extremely provocative and helped produce the intense Aboriginal resistance.⁶³

In addition, the personality of the miner also played an important part in the intensity of conflict. Sellheim asserted that some of

These Palmer miners were of the worst character in the colony, but that many of this criminal class were never charged.⁶⁴ Such men 'not infrequently travel with their rifles loaded and even cocked for fear of a sudden attack'.⁶⁵ Alcohol was seen as responsible for the incidence of crime and the majority of deaths. In a report to the Secretary for Works and Mines, St. George in January 1874, provided the information that:

...nearly all the deaths which have taken place having been the result of drink.⁶⁶

The most interesting aspect of this statement is that it was censored and not allowed to be published.⁶⁷ One wonders if the department of Works and Mines wanted to create a false, but desirable image of the sober, pioneering miner.

Despite the rugged frontiersman image, some miners lacked the discipline needed to guard against all attacks:

in mining frontier areas they [the diggers] carry the most defective weapons; while of those who do carry them one-half are unable to load and consequently fire, and three-fourths of the remainder, after loading, fire with their eyes shut, and bolt into futurity. It is a notorious fact that the majority of men carrying revolvers travel with the whole of their ammunition in their swags.⁶⁸

As well, the Government expected a greater degree of self-protection on mining frontier areas. Seymour, the Commissioner of Police, accused the diggers of not taking adequate precautions and then blaming the Government:

...so long as miners and travellers continue to neglect ordinary precaution, no number of Police that could be stationed in the District could protect them. I have met solitary travellers and packers proceeding leisurely along, some unarmed and many with their rifles either strapped on packhorses or so carefully wrapped up and tied that if required they could not be made use of.⁶⁹

The two atrocities that were cited as typical of the violence on the Palmer - the murder of the Macquarie brothers and the Strau family - received less sympathy at the time than they might have, because in

both cases the victims were unarmed.⁷⁰ The Cooktown Courier bemoaned the fact that the Macquarie brothers instead of fighting were 'run down like paddymelons by a merciless mob of infuriated cannibals'.⁷¹ However, many accounts by the newspapers of deaths reveal a recklessness that was unwise on a goldfield that even at the time had a particularly violent reputation. Miners ventured onto disused tracks⁷² and travelled in very small groups or alone.⁷³

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During the European occupation of the Palmer the decline of the Aboriginal race was seen as requisite to the achievement of the nineteenth century ideal of progress. It was considered the 'manifest destiny' of the European to settle the area. The Cooktown Courier saw the brutal methods of the Native Police as necessary because 'we must settle the country'.⁷⁴ European activity and settlement were seen as a condition of the 'uncompromising energy of the Anglo-Saxon race'.⁷⁵ The Palmer area was a prime example of the triumph of 'civilization' over 'barbarianism'. The Cooktown Herald aptly described this attitude:

But a few months ago, this out-post of civilization was merely the haunt of the Aborigines, in a primitive condition, and possibly the camping-grounds of barbaric warriors who knew nothing of the value of the soil, or the mines of wealth hidden beneath the surface. Civilization has alighted upon the scene - progress has advanced - barbaric cannibalism fled to other parts.⁷⁶

However, due to a combination of many factors, the area as an outpost of European civilization did decline, and it was feared that the converse of this prediction would occur - that decline meant more control by the Aborigine. Such control was seen in 1879 by Morehead, the member for Mitchell, as virtually inevitable.⁷⁷ The Cooktown Courier in response tried to whip up interest in the promotion of 'Progress' in the Cook district:⁷⁸ the daring of the Aborigines was an affront to the principle of Progress, especially in its racial connotation, and intensified the conflict on the frontier. However, the Queensland

government, which upheld the concept of success as its central philosophy,⁷⁹ assumed that high profits from a field would introduce settlers, as had occurred on the pastoral frontier, who were determined enough to deal with the Aboriginal problem themselves. During the 1870's those who did not share the ideals of Progress were regarded under the banner of Social Darwinism. Evans maintains that Social Darwinism encouraged exclusion from society's protection as the proper response to those who did not contribute to Progress. He adds:

Social Darwinism added the grim ultimatum to the process of self help - for only the strong to survive. Whatever Darwin intended, men were encouraged to follow their predatory instincts. The natural "destruction of the weak" was envisaged. The impact of this creed upon a society already dedicated to admiration of the strong and condemnation of the unfit needs little emphasis.⁸⁰

The miners of the Palmer, and those involved in servicing the mining area, must have suffered acutely from a conflict in ideology.

This conflict can be seen with regard to Christianity. A correspondent to the Cooktown Herald complained that the unburied body of an Aborigine would affect the Christian belief in respect for the dead. The editor did not see any such undermining of European morality and accused the correspondent of losing contact with reality, and dared him:

to take a trip up country, unarmed, with the exception of a Bible, spend a week and return, and we will wager which is the most effective - the Book or a snider.⁸¹

Attempts to rationalize the subjugation and destruction of Aboriginal society were typified by extreme ethnocentrism, which in turn was reinforced by Social Darwinist ideas and nineteenth century economic theories. The relegation of the Aborigines to the lowest stage of a 'Great Chain of Being'⁸² served to justify subjugation on the grounds of racial inferiority. This belief was in fact strengthened by the decline in the Aboriginal population. According to Curtin:

The exterminated people were all "the colored races", while the exterminators always appeared to be European. It seemed obvious that some natural law of race relations was at work, that the extinction of the non-Europeans was part of the natural evolution of the world.⁸³

To some the very existence of non-Europeans was unnatural in the face of European expansion. Even in the Cook District, the Cooktown Courier feared that the type of racial thought expressed by the Cooktown Herald would develop into a situation similar to that which had operated in the southern states of the United States:

We [the Cooktown Courier] have no hesitation in saying that a self-governing colony formed in the far North of Queensland, and cut off from all control by the South, would form itself probably in less than a generation - into a community resembling those of Georgia, South Carolina, and the Slave States before the Civil War in America - it would become the plague spot of Australia.⁸⁴

Materialism was also held to be an important aspect of European civilization and the motivating force behind European expansion generally. It was materialism and the acquisition of wealth that explained away the restraints of morality and Christianity because materialism was tangible proof of Progress. In 1877 the Cooktown Courier pointed out the implication that these seemingly contradictory beliefs had on culture contact:

[Morality and Christianity] have nothing to do with the treatment of blacks in this country; we are simply now discussing the best manner of protecting the lives and property of the whites.⁸⁵

The Queenslander maintained that most of the deaths on the Palmer were the result of the 'fierce race for wealth'.⁸⁶

Some saw the killing of Aborigines as 'painfully suggestive of murder',⁸⁷ however, the Cooktown Courier thought otherwise:

Of course we all know that it is ridiculous to expect a whiteman to be hanged for the murder of the black in Queensland.⁸⁸

Yet the Courier differentiated between 'self-defence' and 'dastardly murderous cruelties' which were assumed to have not taken place on the Palmer.⁸⁹ That diggers shot Aborigines without provocation was proudly announced since there was little likelihood of judicial punishment.⁹⁰ The government indirectly approved of the use of firearms by settlers by stressing the necessity of 'self-defence', as the Police were incapable of protecting the miner, let alone the Aborigine. As well as consisting of men who had 'settled' Queensland, the Government was young and sparing on finances especially in the North, and favoured extermination over amelioration to save the expense of a more humanitarian policy.

* * *

There was, however, some concern for the future of the Aborigines, although nothing constructive was done during the first decade after the rush. The Cooktown Courier in fact became more and more conciliatory, and in December 1877, as 'no good results are apparent from the indiscriminate slaughter made of them from time to time', the editor of the newspaper suggested that a truce be called.⁹¹ Several references were made of the need to prevent the same mistakes that occurred on the Palmer happening elsewhere, particularly on more northern and New Guinea goldfields, and in areas of North Queensland settled after the Palmer Rush.⁹² Sub-Inspector O'Connor in 1879 at the Laura River Police Camp attempted to negotiate with the Aborigines of that area. However, despite this attempt, spearings continued, which an informant to the Cooktown Courier blamed on 'a little amateur missionary business, allowing the black vermin to come close to the barracks'.⁹³ Speaking for the settlers, the informant declared:

We don't [like Mr. O'Connor's measures], and should advise that gentleman to set about the business for which he is paid at once, that is to "disperse" them as quickly as possible. A Snider is a splendid civiliser.⁹⁴

With such an attitude it is no wonder that on the Palmer Goldfield the process of 'letting-in' was retarded. The acclamation of firearms as

the only means of civilizing the Aborigines also contained the inference that the Aborigines were to be shot, and not to be negotiated with. There were those who, through experience in the south, were cynical about the real benefits that the Aborigine would receive from European civilization. The Aborigine was seen as incompatible with the physical presence of the European and the ideas inherent in European civilization. Hence in an untitled article in the Cooktown Courier it was stated:

...we are bound to confess that our suggestion is more for the benefit of the whites than the blacks, or if adopted, it would certainly lead to the extermination of the latter. The "blessings of civilization" would prove more fatal to the aborigines than the bullets of the troopers. It is, however, more in accordance with the recognized customs of Christian communities to kill off the aboriginals with rum than with Snider rifles.⁹⁵

The Cooktown Courier did make an attempt to bring about some discussion of the future of the Aborigines, however the public was silent for quite a while because such a topic was unpopular. As 'Humanity' pointed out, shooting was the easiest and fastest method, although a 'barbarous and a crying disgrace to us in the nineteenth century'.⁹⁶ He also argued that conciliation would be cheaper because of the cost of ammunition.⁹⁷ The Herald, however, noting that the Courier had changed from 'bullets to bible'. suggested that the police should be encouraged to do their duty and travellers 'instead of being made to believe the black man's life to be of greater importance than theirs, should be reminded of the risk they are running in trusting themselves unarmed before the spears of the savages'.⁹⁸

Other attempts by government officials to conciliate the Aborigines were made in late 1880.⁹⁹ While Inspector Fitzgerald handed out handkerchiefs and blankets to the Aborigines nearer Cooktown, the Warden of the Palmer River Goldfield was handing out blankets to the Aborigines around Maytown.¹⁰⁰ In 1880 Monsieur Albert Rose, a French botanist, visited the Aborigines North of the Endeavour, much to the praise of the Queenslander.¹⁰¹ Such an unprecedented act by a stranger led to a demand by the Mayor of Cooktown, John Davis, for a reserve at

Cape Bedford, north of Cooktown.¹⁰² The report of the Police Commissioner in the same year stated that attempts in the Northern Districts to come to terms with the Aborigines were 'at length commencing to show satisfactory results', and might lead to a decrease in the numbers of Native Police in those districts.¹⁰³ In the western part of the Goldfield, the Aborigines were not amenable to such attempts. Sub-Inspector Jocelyn Brooke, who had experience in the Mackay¹⁰⁴ and Cooktown areas,¹⁰⁵ was, as has been stated, sympathetic to conciliation with the Aborigines. However, he was quite apprehensive about the readiness of the Palmer Aborigines in 1882. Of Edward Palmer's attempt to 'let in' the Aborigines on Gamboola Station he declared, 'He [Edward Palmer] might as well talk of making prisoners of the kangaroos....'¹⁰⁶ Of Palmer himself, Brooke was critical of his motives:

I fancy he be more anxious to benefit
himself than the blacks their labour
being very cheap.¹⁰⁷

Brooke considered that at the end of 1882 the Aborigines of the western Palmer were too dangerous. He admonished Edward Palmer for his lack of sense, yet admitted that the sensitive situation at Gamboola was caused by unscrupulous Europeans interfering with the Aboriginal women. The limited attempts at 'letting-in' were initiated by one pastoralist and a handful of Native Police officers. No attempts were recorded in the local newspapers of miners even considering conciliatory action. The combination of the nature of mining itself, the terrain, and the reliance on firearms, lessened the likelihood that the miners would deal with the Aborigines in anything but a violent manner. Contributing to this was the Aboriginal resistance which for the same reasons increased the violence and reluctance to conciliate. Such was the nature of the Palmer frontier which contributed so much to North Queensland folklore.

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4. From James McHenley, 29 August 1874, in the Queenslander, 3 October 1874.
5. Ibid., 11 October 1873, in an article entitled 'The Palmer Rush - Letter from one of the Prospectors' by J.V. Mulligan dated 10 September, Georgetown.
6. Ibid., 25 October 1873. The Etheridge correspondent's report is dated 15 September 1873.
7. Ibid., 1 May, 15 May, 22 May, 12 June, 19 June, 26 June, 3 July 1880. The series was entitled 'How We Civilize the Blacks'.
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9. Ibid., 15 November 1873.
10. Gold Field Commissioner Howard St. George to the Secretary for Works and Mines, Endeavour River, 30 October 1873. Q.S.A. WOR A/74 73/4597.
11. Sydney Morning Herald, 7 January 1874; see quote in a letter by C.G. Heydon to the Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, Qld. V. & P. 1875, Vol. I, p.625.
12. Joseph Cooper to the Earl of Carnarvon, 4 May 1874, Qld. V. & P. 1875, Vol. I, p.621.
13. Charles Gilbert Heydon was son of Jabez King Heydon (who emigrated to Australia in 1838, became a well-known Roman Catholic convert and Editor of the Sydney Freeman's Journal). Fellow of St. John College affiliated to Sydney University 1873. Called to the bar of N.S.W. 25 September 1875 and several times Acting Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court, Queen's Council November 1896, and appointed sole Commissioner for Consolidating the Statute Law of N.S.W. August 1896. F. Johns, John's Notable Australians, Melbourne, 1906, p.81.

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15. Ibid.
16. A.L. McDougall to the Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, Qld. V. & P., 1875, Vol. I, p.622.
17. St. George to Secretary for Works and Mines, Endeavour River, 30 October 1873. Q.S.A. WOR/A74 73/4597.
18. Report of G.E. Dalrymple to Under Colonial Secretary Endeavour River, 30 October 1873, in which he acknowledged receipt of Under Colonial Secretary's command to deliver to St. George two of Dalrymple's Native Troopers. The Queenslander, 15 November 1873.
19. J.W. Chesson to the Earl of Carnarvon, 16 October 1874. Qld. V. & P., 1875, Vol. I, p.627.
20. D.T. Seymour to the Colonial Secretary, 31 July 1874. Qld. V. & P., op.cit.
21. Earl of Carnarvon, Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Governor of the Colony of Queensland, the Marquis of Normanby, 13 May 1874. Qld. V. & P., op.cit., p.621.
22. Normanby to Carnarvon, 10 August 1875. Qld. V. & P., op.cit., p.624.
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